

Baccalaureate 2013

President Ronald D. Liebowitz

May 25, 2013—Mead Chapel

Good afternoon. On behalf of the faculty, staff, and trustees of the College, I extend a warm welcome to you, the Class of 2013, and to your parents, families, and friends who have joined you on campus this weekend to celebrate your accomplishments.

Today we reflect on your experiences over the past four years and on your contributions to our community and the world beyond the College. And, of course, since this is Commencement weekend, we look ahead, as well, to future opportunities as you begin the next chapter of your lives.

Let me begin by telling you a few things about the graduating class:

- There are 661 graduates in this class (including February and May graduates), 331 men and 330 women.
- The most popular major was economics, followed by political science, environmental studies, psychology, international and global studies, and English and American literatures.
- More than 400 of you studied abroad for a semester or a year, and you did so in 49 different countries.
- More than 20 percent of this class completed the requirements for a joint or dual major.
- More students in this class hail from New York than from any other state, with Massachusetts, California, New Jersey, and Connecticut rounding out the top five.
- One hundred members of the Class of 2013 come from outside the United States, representing 55 different countries.

Members of your class have won:

- A Thomas J. Watson Fellowship
- A Keasbey Fellowship
- A Truman Scholarship
- Fulbright Scholarships; and
- State Department Critical Language Scholarships

In keeping with long-standing Middlebury tradition, many of you have published papers in scholarly journals and presented your work at national conferences.

The imagination of this class was on display April 18 and 19 during the seventh-annual College-wide symposium recognizing student research and creativity. More than 150 members of the class participated in the symposium by presenting their research or demonstrating special talents in the performing arts.

And speaking of the symposium, the arts events associated with it included: the Senior Thesis Dance Concert, Music in the Museum, a demonstration of digital music, and performances by the Mountain Ayres, Middlebury Mamajamas, and MiddJazz ensemble. There was a live display of theatrical costumes, the screening of student-produced films including six by members of this class. Nine seniors played instruments in the Musical Showcase; two short plays from the Middlebury New Play Festival were performed with seniors in the cast; and a drama written by a member of this class was staged at the Hepburn Zoo. Another member of this class will have a professional production of his play at Theaterforum in Berlin next January, and his senior thesis play has been held over for possible production at the 2014 Kennedy Center/American College Theatre Festival.

This past year the Dance Company of Middlebury performed locally and toured nationally. It was also a busy and fruitful year for the seniors in the theatre program, choral groups, and musical ensembles, too.

In athletics, 154 of you played on varsity teams, which, during your time at Middlebury, won 13 NESCAC championships, two national team championships, and two national individual championships. In addition (and perhaps more importantly), 107 members of the Class of 2013 were named to all-academic teams for their prowess in the classroom *and* on the field of play.

The Solar Decathlon has been a focal point for this class, as the College's involvement in the program has its roots in 2009, the year you entered Middlebury. Fifteen members of the class were active participants on the 2011 SD team and 30 of you are involved with InSite House, the College's 2013 project. As one current Solar Decathlon member said, "The seniors demonstrated true leadership through their respect for, and collaboration with, other members of the team. The seniors have been the critical thinkers who applied their liberal arts education to meet the challenges of our real-world project."

Twenty-two of you earned Public Service Leadership Awards from the College for your volunteerism, activism, and advocacy for others.

One hundred twelve members of this class were involved with the Project on Creativity and Innovation, or P.C.I., during their years at

Middlebury.

- Fourteen students developed their own businesses through the Winter Term course, "Middlebury Entrepreneurs."
- At least seven sustainable companies were started and developed by members of this class.
- Students in this class were instrumental in the creation of the M Gallery in the Old Stone Mill, which, beginning in the fall, will have a sister gallery at Kirk Alumni Center, to be called the K Gallery.

Two members of this class received a grant from the Center for Social Entrepreneurship to train international health organizations in the use of GIS technology to improve their services in third-world countries

Two students received Davis Projects for Peace grants, one to build a library in Kenya and the other to educate and train future entrepreneurs in India.

And four students from the graduating class are using Davis Projects for Peace as a case study to assess the impact of student-driven social change projects.

The Center for the Comparative Study of Race and Ethnicity also benefitted from the leadership exhibited by the Class of 2013. Five members of the class served on the CCSRE's student advisory board, and two members were interns at the Center in 2012-13. This senior class, in particular, has played a key role in creating programs that have become signature events for the Center.

This is just a sample of the accomplishments of the Class of 2013. We are enormously proud of all that you contributed to this vibrant and talented community. I provide this summary at Commencement each year, recognizing that I couldn't possibly include all that your class accomplished during the past four years. You leave behind an important legacy to this institution and we all thank you.

The Rabbi and the Wagon Driver

Baccalaureate Address: May 25, 2013

The Baccalaureate address, going back to its roots more than 500 years ago, was to be the final sermon, a religious address, to the graduating class. It originated at Oxford in 1432, and its sermons were invariably Christian. The president of the college or university usually gave this address; however, given my own religious background, and the fact that I am one of only a handful of the College's 16 presidents not to have been an ordained minister, it would be quite a challenge to retain the full tradition of the Baccalaureate address.

I should also note that, according to historical records, Baccalaureate speeches are often intermixed with musical performances, drama, and worship, and the main address can range in length from under 10 minutes to as long as four hours. Have no fear! Though we have been graced today by our wonderful College choir, I am far more likely by disposition to present a shorter rather than longer speech, and that will certainly be the case today.

I will adhere to tradition only to the extent that I view today's Baccalaureate service as my opportunity to speak to you as a class for the final time before you graduate.

Although this is by no means a religious address, it draws upon lessons from the Talmud, the 2,000-year-old collection of rabbinic writings on Jewish law and tradition. In fact, the Talmud is much more than a collection of writings. According to Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, a leading Talmudic commentator and translator, "The Talmud is . . . a conglomerate of law, legend, and philosophy, a blend of unique logic and shrewd pragmatism, of history and science, anecdotes, and humor. Although its main objective is to interpret and comment on a book of law, it is, simultaneously, a work of art that goes beyond legislation and its practical application."

The particular story I am about to re-tell and which forms the basis of my message to the graduating class has been adopted by Jewish communities over many centuries. It has used different names and geographical settings. This particular version, adapted for young children, and discovered for me earlier this year through our family's nightly ritual of bedtime reading, appears in [A Treasury of Jewish Bedtime Stories by Shmuel Blitz](#). And the story goes like this:

The rabbi of Pinsk wanted to meet the people of Pichinev. "Prepare the wagon," he told Yussel his driver. "We're going to Pichinev."

During the trip, Yussel confessed, "Rabbi, I am jealous of you. When we arrive in Pichinev all the people will crowd around the wagon, giving you much honor and respect. But me, they will ignore. And they don't really know either of us. If I would be wearing your clothing instead of my rags, the people would think I'm the rabbi and would honor me instead."

The rabbi felt sorry for Yussel. "If receiving honor is so important to you, then I will be happy to switch clothing. But what will you answer if the people ask you a hard question about Jewish law?" the rabbi asked.

"Don't worry," answered Yussel. "It will be fine."

The two men exchanged clothing. The rabbi put on Yussel's old patched coat, while Yussel put on the rabbi's black satin coat. When they arrived in Pichinev, the people came to greet the rabbi. But they honored Yussel the wagon driver. They ignored the real rabbi of Pinsk.

"Rabbi, we are so glad that you came," the leaders of Pichinev said to Yussel. "We have a very difficult question." They brought over a large book and pointed out a problem that no one in the town could solve.

Yussel took the book and looked intently at it. He ran one hand over the page and the other hand through his beard. He rubbed his brow and coughed a few times.

Finally, he looked up at the townspeople and said, "This is the kind of simple question you ask me? I thought you would ask me something difficult. This question is so easy, even my wagon driver could answer it. Go ask him!!!"

They did. And of course the learned rabbi knew just what to say.

On the surface, this is a rather straight forward story: a person of means helps a person of lesser means attain happiness. The rabbi, routinely showered with respect and admiration because of his decades of study, recognized learnedness, and his crucial role as arbiter of disputes ranging from the routine to the absurd, agrees to switch clothes with his wagon driver. In doing so, he ultimately conveys to the wagon driver the attention and respect of the people of a small village. The wagon driver is fulfilled and the rabbi feels good because he has done a good deed...a *mitzvah*—an act of human kindness.

If we wanted to tailor this tale to our graduates' circumstances, one might say that Yussel the wagon driver exhibited the kind of *on-one's-feet nimble thinking* we would expect from graduates who are educated in the liberal arts tradition at Middlebury: able to analyze and size-up situations rather quickly and then offer up a plausible and maybe even brilliant solution to what might appear to be an insoluble conundrum. It takes very little to concoct the clothes-swapping caper to create an outer appearance of the wagon driver being something he was not. It requires another level of imagination and thinking, however, to exercise the kind of moxie that Yussel exhibited in order to preserve what was for him such a jubilant moment.

But typical of most tales whose origins are in the Talmud, there is much more embedded in this story than these interpretations. Some of the less-than-apparent questions and messages raised within it are important ones for you, as you reflect on your liberal arts education both today and, perhaps more importantly, over the course of your lives. Here are just a few:

Why did the rabbi choose not to use the wagon driver's admitted jealousy and covetousness as a teachable moment? One might expect the rabbi to have either ignored Yussel's request, or to have engaged him in some prolonged discussion and learning about his self-proclaimed jealousy, a form of covetousness, which is, of course, forbidden by the Tenth Commandment. A rabbi's duty is to teach and so why the silence?

Why did the rabbi accept Yussel's "*It will be fine*" reply about what would happen if he were asked a difficult question? Rabbis are known to ask many questions and are rarely satisfied with one answer. Yet in this case, the rabbi accepted a rather flippant four-word response to an important question, the answer to which, if left only vaguely considered, could lead Yussel to be exposed as an imposter; and could put the Rabbi's reputation itself at risk; and...

What might the people of Pichinev have learned from seeing a wagon driver answer their difficult question when not even the most learned in their village could answer it?

Crucial to answering all of these questions is an understanding of the values and objectives that governed the rabbi's choices and actions. As we discovered in this story, the rabbi, who had all the facts and learnedness he needed to dissuade the wagon driver from doing something he might later regret, chose not to pursue that path. He had the self-confidence necessary to defy how those around him might have expected him to put his learnedness to work. As a result, the rabbi was able to fulfill his own desire to treat his wagon driver with compassion, even in the face of the wagon driver's problematic request.

Perhaps, too, the rabbi intended to use Yussel's desire to exchange identities to teach the people of Pichinev that wisdom can come from anyone, not solely from those identified as learned or carrying the title rabbi. In this way, the rabbi was able to teach an important lesson to the people of Pichinev.

The rabbi's clarity about his objectives of compassion and education, and his independent-mindedness regarding ways of achieving his objectives, seems to me to be the key take-away of this story for you now, as you find yourselves taking stock of your own learnedness.

My hope is that you have been educated here in a way that will provide you with that same kind of clarity, bravery, and confidence as you contemplate and navigate the challenging grey areas that stand between you and the complex world you will soon enter. Your liberal arts education has provided you with an impressive breadth and depth of knowledge, but what is now most important is for you to draw upon those gifts to examine the objectives and values that motivate your actions. As part of this process, you will strengthen your resolve to resist "group think" and acting in "lock step" just as, in the story, the rabbi pursued his objective of compassion and education in a way that might have challenged community expectations of rabbinic behavior.

Commencement, of course, means "the beginning" of something, not the end. As you leave Middlebury to begin the next exciting and challenging chapter of your lives, may you always be cognizant of the riches of your liberal arts education—how it has prepared you to think critically and to think on your feet, to accept ambiguity as part of everyday life, to differentiate between facts and emotion when considering complex issues, and to draw upon the multiple ways you have learned to know what you know—through positivist, data-based analysis as well as through more humanistic approaches—so you may, like the rabbi, choose right and do right by the values that govern you and motivate you. After all, isn't that the value and the beauty of a liberal arts education?

Members of the Class of 2013: we look forward to following your progress, celebrating your successes, and welcoming you back to campus often...dressed in whatever clothes you wish!

Thank you, and best of luck.

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